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SUBJECT: LITHUANIAN GOVERNMENT SEES H1N1 THREAT AS
OVERBLOWN, EVEN AS CASES RISE

REF: VILNIUS 455

¶1. SUMMARY: After H1N1 flu sickened dozens of cadets at a Lithuanian military academy, GOL officials have urged the public not to panic. At the same time, they have decided to stop testing flu victims to determine whether they have the H1N1 virus, and have yet to decide whether to purchase any H1N1 vaccine. Health officials say Lithuania has about 6,500 cases of seasonal flu, but only 68 confirmed cases of H1N1 flu. However, only several dozen patients have been tested, so nobody knows how many of those 6,500 flu cases are H1N1. The president has urged people not to be frightened of H1N1 because its mortality rate is about the same as that of seasonal flu. Senior health officials are skeptical of the H1N1 threat and the value of vaccination. Pharmacies at times remain sold out of flu remedies and face masks. Post's working group on H1N1 flu met on November 4 and reviewed the embassy's preparations for a pandemic. End summary.

¶2. In the aftermath of the current flu outbreak in neighboring Ukraine and the announcement that H1N1 flu has struck about 50 cadets at a military academy in Vilnius, Lithuanian pharmacies saw a run on flu remedies and face masks, just as they did when the first flu cases were reported in North America several months ago. Vice Minister of Health Arunas Skikas characterized the current shortages as "games of pharmacists" who wanted to create increased demand for their products. Skikas told the press on November 4 that Lithuania had about 6,500 cases of seasonal flu, and only 68 cases of H1N1 flu. There have been no reported flu deaths this year in Lithuania. But most flu victims are not tested to determine which virus they have, and Skikas did not say how health officials had determined that most of the victims had seasonal flu.

¶3. The 68 cases of H1N1 flu are easier to count. The GOL includes in that number only cases confirmed by laboratory testing. After 50 or more cadets at a military academy came down with the flu at the beginning of November, the GOL tested just six of them, saying that sample would be sufficient. The six tests were positive for H1N1, and so the GOL added those six cases to its H1N1 total -- but did not also add the other several dozen cadets who shared barracks with them and also had the flu. Three days after the cadets became ill, the academy was temporarily shut down and employees told to call in after the weekend to see when they should return to work. Health officials told us that they are not monitoring the health of family members or others the cadets may have been in contact with in the days before they fell ill.

¶4. The head of the Infectious Diseases and Aids Center, Dr. Saulius Caplinskas, is one of the GOL's key advisors on influenza. He told us on November 4 that he was skeptical of

the value of the H1N1 vaccine, saying it could actually do more harm than good because of side effects. He said he doubted many people in Lithuania would want to be vaccinated, and said he would not want his own child vaccinated with it. He charged that international drug companies have created "noise" about the new virus to raise the fear level, sell more vaccine and increase their profits. With Caplinskas advising, the GOL has not yet decided whether to purchase any H1N1 vaccine. GOL officials say the vaccine is probably not necessary, given the low number of H1N1 cases in Lithuania and the reluctance of Lithuanians to be vaccinated. Health officials, however, tell us that those stockpiles are sufficient only to treat 3.5 percent of the population. President Dalia Grybauskaite also has publicly urged people not to fear H1N1 flu, saying that it is no more lethal than seasonal flu.

¶5. The AIDS Center is the only lab that does H1N1 testing in Lithuania. Vice Minister Skikas said that the GOL will soon stop testing all suspected cases of H1N1, and instead will conduct occasional random sampling to keep track of flu trends. He said that because treatment of seasonal and H1N1 flu is identical, the GOL saw no need to track all cases of H1N1 flu.

¶6. Lithuania does communicate regularly with EU health officials about influenza cases and trends, and the European Center for Disease Control and Prevention (ECDC) publishes information from member states on its website. Each week, Lithuania provides ECDC with updated numbers of new H1N1 and seasonal flu cases. GOL officials also take part in periodic teleconferences among member states; there were three such conferences this week. The EU provides recommendations to

member countries on H1N1 prevention, treatment and vaccination, but states are not required to follow them. EU member states can request assistance from the EU, but Lithuania has made no such requests yet, said one GOL health official to whom we spoke November 5.

¶7. Post convened a working group on November 4 to review preparedness for wider spread of the flu. We have shared information with schools that have American-citizen students, and have repeatedly reminded all Mission staffers of basic precautions to take to minimize risk of flu exposure, and alcohol-based hand sanitizers have been distributed to all offices. All Mission staff, American and local, have been urged to have flu shots in Post's medical unit. Post also has adequate supplies of Tamiflu and face masks. The working group, spearheaded by the ESTH officer and medical office, continues to monitor the flu situation in Lithuania.

¶8. Comment: Lithuania, fortunately, has had no reported flu deaths so far this year, and does not have nearly as many flu cases as some other European countries. When the pandemic does strike here, though, we fear that the medical bureaucracy's attitude and lack of preparation could make the situation worse. We will continue to monitor Lithuania's preparations for a pandemic, encourage the GOL to take planning seriously, and will seek ways to assist the GOL should flu tighten its grip on the country. End comment.
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